MONTANA PRAIRIE DOG WORKING GROUP

Meeting Record: JANUARY 23 & 24, 2008, BILLINGS, MT

****NEXT MEETING:** TENTATIVELY SCHEDULED FOR FALL 2008 IN BILLINGS****

Participants: Bobby Baker, Allison Begley, Kristy Bly, Rod Boland, Jo Ann Dullum, David Gaillard, Brad Hall, Lou Hanebury, Pete Husby, Francis Jacobs, Craig Knowles, Randy Matchett, Bryce Maxell, Jay Parks, Glenn Patrick, Dave Pauli, Linda Poole, Ryan Rauscher, Don Sasse, John Steuber, Scott Story, Brad Stovall, Monty Sullins, Ted Toombs, Jerry Wiscomb

Agenda Items: Updates on BTPDs, WTPDs, BUOW, MOPL
Natural Heritage Program NatureTracker
Potential for using aerial photography to map PD colonies
Developing a statewide estimate of BTPD acreage
WTPD translocation in Carbon Co.
BTPD, WTPD status updates
Reintroduction of BFFs on Northern Cheyenne Tribal lands
CRP and PDs
Report on enzootic plague research
Working with NRCS to conserve biodiversity
Using landowner incentives for PDs

Recent Publications: *If you would like a copy of any of these recent publications, please email (apuchniak@mt.gov) or call (406-247-2966) Allison to have them mailed to you. Please let me know if there are others that we can add.*

Jachowski, D.S, J.J. Millspaugh, D.E. Biggins, T.M. Livieri, M.R. Matchett (2008). Implications of black-tailed prairie dog spatial dynamics to black-footed ferrets. *Natural Areas Journal* 28(1): 14-25.

Miller, B.J., R.P.Reading, D.E. Biggins, J.K. Detling, S.C. Forrest, J.L. Hoogland, J. Javersak, S.D. Miller, J. Proctor, J. Truett, & D.W. Uresk. (2007). Prairie Dogs: An Ecological Review and Current Biopolitics. *Journal of Wildlife Management* 71(8): 2801-2810.

Pauli, J.N. & S.W. Buskirk (2007). Recreational Shooting of Prairie Dogs: A portal for lead entering wildlife food chains. *Journal of Wildlife Management* 71(1): 103-108.

Pauli, J.N. & S.W. Buskirk (2007). Risk-disturbance overrides density dependence in a hunted, colonial rodent, the black-tailed prairie dog *Cynomys ludovicianus*. *Journal of Applied Ecology* 44, 1219-1230.

Snäll, T., R.B.O'Hara, C.Ray & S.K.Collinge (2008). Cimate-driven spatial dynamics of plague among prairie dog colonies. *American Naturalist* 171 (2): 238-248

UPDATES

BTPD = black-tailed prairie dogs
WTPD = white-tailed prairie dogs

DON SASSE (USFS-CUSTER NF): Working on database for Custer National Forest – including some burrowing owl observation. There has been some increased interest in shooting on FS lands.

JAY PARKS (BLM-BILLINGS FO): There has been no mapping in the Billings FO this year. Participated in WTPD translocation with MFWP.

MONTY SULLINS (MT DEPT OF AG): There have been no changes in the vertebrate pest program, even with changes in statute. MDA still provides assistance and training for field rodent control. Poisoning varies between years and counties – in some areas impacted by drought, there were increased calls for assistance.

FRANCIS JACOBS (RANCHER, PHILLIPS CO.): working on Region 6 PD Implementation Committee (R6 PDIC) trying to develop a Category 1 Complex. Plague has hit the area hard in the last 2 years.

KRISTY BLY (WORLD WILDLIFE FUND): also working on R6 PDIC. Due to plague, the 7 colonies on American Prairie Foundation (APF) lands have been reduced to 100 ac. WWF were successful in acquiring grant monies (WCS) for a possible translocation of BTPDs on APF lands within the Region 6 plan. Will be surveying for Mountain Plover (MOPL) and Burrowing Owls (BUOW) this summer.

SCOTT STORY (MFWP): Nongame data manager for FWP, working in collaboration with NHP. Will be working with the PD database, and closely with Bryce. Would welcome any mapping/point data available, or direction to those that have been mapping that may have data to contribute. Where are there data gaps in the state?

JOHN STEUBER (APHIS-WILDLIFE SERVICES): Have not been involved in much PD control in recent years in Montana. This year WS was involved with only one case of PD control at an airport (safety issue). WS is involved in surveillance of plague and tularemia, and have been involved in some burrow dusting in South Dakota. Have collected >1000 nubuto strips (test for plague and tularemia) this year from coyotes, wolves, foxes, badger (captured during the course of regular damage management activities) and are awaiting results from CDC. WS has a full-time Wildlife Disease Biologist on staff in Billings that is available to assist other agencies in disease-related projects.

Q: Can some PDs survive plague? There have been a few instances of BTPDs (e.g. WY) that have been found to have titers in their blood, indicating that the individual was exposed to the disease but are currently showing no symptoms. CMR is testing some individuals that remained after plague wiped out most of a town…they are also awaiting results.

BOBBY BAKER (BLM-MILES CITY FO): Currently monitoring in the area of proposed CBM development. With some of the development to start, more monitoring is expected. The SEIS for CBM is expected to be complete this fall. May have some monies to identify potential Category 1 & 2 PD complexes in the area. Also working on developing new RMP for this FO.

JO ANN DULLUM (CMR USFWS): CMR-NWR has experienced widespread plague in 2007, including UL Bend (~48% of PDs lost). Approximately 800 BTPDs were translocated to re-create 130 PD ac that had been extirpated by plague. 270 of the animals translocated were tested for plague titers (½ from healthy towns, ½ from towns that experienced plague); i.e. were there any survivors? Still awaiting results.

CRAIG KNOWLES (FAUNAWEST): Has been working on a field review of current PD acreage in R6. Plague in S Phillips Co. has been widespread: 24% of the colonies visited had 0 activity; many colonies have been reduced to 5-10 acres, approximately 1/3 of the colonies (west of Rock Creek) are unaffected by plague. Interesting notes: 3 BTPD colonies in middle of 40-Complex/Beauchamp Creek (in center of plague zone) that were dusted between 2002-2005 were extremely active; 2 colonies from 2004 plague outbreak at 40-Complex/Beauchamp Creek appear healthy now. Plague epizootics seem to spread like a wave over an area over several years.

BRAD STOVALL (CROW NATION FISH & GAME DEPT): Last mapping was completed in 2003. Will be mapping in 2008 with grant money. Will be mapping by section with the help of other Rangers. Tribe is enthusiastic about possibilities – swift fox, BUOW, and becoming a possible BFF reintroduction site. Using as an opportunity to get agriculture versus grasslands and noxious weed information.

LINDA POOLE (NATURE CONSERVANCY): Have been working with grassbank partners (ranchers and agencies) on conservation of sage grouse, grassland birds, PDs, etc. on Matador Ranch (60,000 ac) and about 250,000 acres operated by our grassbank partners. The grassbank conserves about 4,000-5,000 acres of PDs a year, though plague has reduced that number a lot this year. Working as part of Region 6 PDIC and talking with neighbors about their ideas and concerns tied to PD management. TNC putting a lot of effort into partnerships (grassbankers, Ranchers Stewardship Alliance and other conservation groups, scientists, agencies, etc) right now.

DAVE PAULI (HUMANE SOCIETY): Also member of the National PD Coalition. Working in Colorado on 300 to 600 urban prairie dog translocation. Just finished swift fox translocation (at Lower Brule). National PD Coalition is also looking at incentives.

ROD BOLAND (PRIVATE BUSINESS): Have received inquiries about effect of plague on shooting opportunities – some shooters still come.

FRITZ PRELLWITZ (BLM-MALTA FIELD OFFICE): Please note that the 40-Complex area is now known as Beauchamp Creek. The name has been changed to help people find the location on a map, and it includes both the "Pea Ridge" and "40 Complex" reintroduction sites.

I've included both names in these notes to facilitate understanding. We will use Beauchamp Creek from this point on. ~allison

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PLANNING EFFORTS UNDERWAY:

Charles M Russell National Wildlife Refuge: Undergoing review of its 15-year Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP). Public meetings are planned for scoping. This is a 4-year process. http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/planning/States/Montana/cmr/cmrccp_update1.pdf

BLM Resource Management Plans (RMP):
http://www.blm.gov/mt/st/en/prog/planning.1.html

Miles City Field Office: This RMP is underway, and a draft is expected for public review this fall. Inviting collaborators to determine the preferred alternatives. Process takes up to 3 years. Final should be completed in 2009/2010.

Malta Field Office: A preliminary draft should be ready sometime this year. To be completed in 2010. R6 prairie dog plan will be incorporated at some level.

Billings Field Office: Will begin scoping this year.

Lewistown Field Office: Will begin scoping this year (?)

BRYCE MAXELL (MONTANA NATURAL HERITAGE PROGRAM)

NATURE TRACKER:

- NHP receives some core funding from the state to provide an unbiased data repository. There are 16 staff, including 3 zoologists. The Species of Concern list is co-managed with MFWP. Have recently completed an MOU with MFWP regarding data exchange.
- Nature Tracker draws data from 2 sources: Montana Bird Distribution database (MBD) and the Point Observation database (POD). The Tracker has 2 levels of access: a coarser scale for the general public, and more specific data for agency level access. Queries of the Tracker produce map and tabular data.
- Bryce demonstrated use of the Nature Tracker. New features include a photo viewer to view photos of sites inventoried for amphibians, or vegetations plots.
- Data is submitted from a variety of sources (e.g. via permits from FWP, university research, birder's field trip) through a variety of means (through the website, in an excel spreadsheet, in hardcopy form).

PRAIRIE DOG DATABASE:

- Bryce reviewed some of the issues with the current PD database (e.g. polygons that appear representative of a PD colony on an air photo, but the boundaries are off; or polygons that do not appear in the vicinity of PD colony or appropriate habitat).
- Some basic information (e.g. the datum that data was collected in) could alleviate some of these errors in the database.
- Scott Story can be reached at sstory@mt.gov if you have questions about submitting PD data.

PRAIRIE DOG MAPPING:

- See hand-out for summary of preliminary discussion.

- Many of the objectives within the PD Conservation Plan, and a core data need for NHP, are met with a spatial representation of PD colonies in MT (i.e. a map with polygons indicating where prairie dogs exist).
- Bryce and staff at NHP have been working on the possibility of digitizing PD colonies using NAIP (air photo) imagery. This would require ground truthing to check for accuracy. There are potential temporal issues: ie. the NAIP photos were flown in 2005, and are proposed to be taken every 5 years, as funding allows. NHP is interested in pursuing this project with PDWG support. The cost of digitizing the air photos is ~$30,000 without ground truthing. Ground truthing could/should be coordinated with other efforts. There is a possibility of incorporating a model (e.g. soil type) to focus the areas that are reviewed in the airphotos.

RYAN RAUSCHER (MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS)

AERIAL LINE INTERCEPT SURVEY TO ESTIMATE CURRENT PD ACREAGE:

- This methodology has been used in SD/CO/NE to estimate acreage in those states. There has been 'improvements' incorporated to the method over time. This is a peer-reviewed methodology.
- To reach objectives we need a repeatable methodology (that is less dependent on other agencies or products) to estimate PD acreage in MT (with confidence intervals). Will be following CO's most recent technique, including approval to use customized software. Transects will be flown in counties with PDs, and the beginning (proximal) and end (distal) of PD town along that line will be marked. The estimate will be based on the proportion of flown area that has PDs. Ground truthing is an important component to confirm species and determine activity (>50% active, <50% inactive). Working to improve the accuracy of the estimate – could consider flying over known towns to test accuracy of start/stop. Tribal lands will not be flown.
- The budget includes flight time (~200-250 hours), personnel time, and equipment. Currently, we are looking at a one-time SWG budget – but are hoping to be able to repeat the effort in the future.
- Flights will be conducted from June – Aug 2008.
- This would complement the digital mapping effort.
- In 2004, Craig Knowles flew SE MT – it took 135 flight hours to document 1796 colonies. Craig is currently conducting some mapping in R6 to assist with the PDIC.
- This proposal will identify the optimal number of transects by county based on a fixed budget and current PD acreage. The project will be statewide. Currently our margin of error is predicted between 10-17%. Because of the scale of the project – teasing out county estimates will be difficult (even in high density areas). This methodology does improve with repeated samples (optimal allocation improves).

Discussion: What is the potential impact detectability might have on our estimate? The possibility of developing a correction factor was discussed. We need to remember that we are looking at a minimum estimate. Ground squirrels and ants can be difficult to distinguish from the air. Will be flying 55m above ground.

Question: How are the transects placed? A random point is selected and the grid follows with standard interval distances. (stratified random sampling).

Question: What would it take to run the full methodology (ie. not fixed budget)? $2.2 million – not feasible. We are targeting our best potential with a limited budget.

Question: Will this be difficult with the cross-winds? Could be difficult, but we will have the length of the transect recorded – and the estimate is based on the proportion of the flown transect.

The final proposal will be sent out to the group.

LOU HANEBURY (U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE)

BLACK-FOOTED FERRET REINTRODUCTION ON NORTHERN CHEYENNE:

- Northern Cheyenne, with USFWS and BIA, have been developing a Prairie Conservation Program to restore prairie sagebrush grasslands including black-footed ferrets (BFF), swift fox (SWFO), native fish species, bison, and mountain plover (MOPL; although habitat is not as well suited for MOPL). Program includes a Landowner Incentive Program (LIP) to protect PD colonies and Tribal Wildlife Grant (TWG) to implement the program. Required actions to move the program forward include Tribal resolutions, landowner agreements, permit applications, formal consultation with/within USFWS. It has taken 7 years to get to this point.
- History of the NC BTPD colonies: In 1991, there were 11000 ac of BTPD; plague hit in 1995 and reduced acreage to 400-700 ac; in 2006, BTPD acreage was over 5000 ac. In the Ashland flats area, BFFs will be released (Nov 24, 2008) on 2 BTPD complexes (1.5 km rule) totaling 5600 ac. There is no set rule for timing post-plague to release BFFs. BFFs will be released as Endangered (not non-essential/experimental as in other release sites in MT). Release = 4 male, 4 female BFFs
- LIP program will offer $10/ac for full protection of PDs. CCAAs may be possible.
- PD burrows will be dusted this spring, recaptured/newly released BFFs will be given the plague vaccine. Cost of dusting = $10/ac (product and labor). Some monitoring (spot-lighting) will happen in the summer, but there is less burden on monitoring for this effort.
- BFF Recovery Team recently released the request for new allocation proposals this spring. Northern Cheyenne will look to release 30-40 additional BFFs in Fall 2008.
- The USFWS Recovery Permit is the same concept as Safe Harbor Agreement. Acquisition of permit required public comment period. Only MFWP submitted comments. If BFFs leave Tribal lands, they will be captured and returned to reintroduction site at landowner request. If Northern Cheyenne opted to cease reintroduction, remaining BFFs would be captured and moved to a new/existing site.

http://billingsgazette.net/articles/2008/01/25/news/state/18-ferret_g.txt

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RYAN RAUSCHER (MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS)

REGION 6 PD PLAN IMPLEMENTATION TEAM (PDIC):

- R6 plan was completed in March 2006. The plan identifies the goals, and acreage and complex objectives for BTPDs in R6. The plan is tied to finding landowner incentives. Complex objectives are set with the 1.5 km rule (not 7 km).
- Tools identified in the Plan include: Rancher Stewardship Alliance, Rodent Control Districts, TNC's Grassbank, grazing on CMR, translocation, land exchange.

- Currently working to implement the plan, i.e. execution of Plan objectives by Implementation Committee with an Implementation Coordinator. There are 12 members of the PDIC with other invited participants. Perspectives cover a broad spectrum.
- Craig Knowles is working on field reviews of current PD acreage on public lands.
- PDIC is working on developing Best Management Practices for PDs. MFWP's goal is to have a 'to-do' list following 6 meetings of the PDIC. The meetings have been widely publicized in the local area.

GLENN PATRICK (FARM SERVICES AGENCY)

CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM (CRP):

- In the past, FSA has required PD control on CRP lands to maintain 'cover'. There are over 3.2 million acres enrolled in CRP, so there is some potential for PD acres. Currently there are not many contracts with PD acres.
- In administration of CRP (federal program), a private landowner (or state lands) hare compensated in a 10-15 year contract for converting cropland to upland cover. There is a $4/ac payment for maintenance. It was started to address (1) erosion control, but also serves to maintain (2) water quality, and (3) wildlife cover. During the renewal process, assessments of enrolled acres indicated that there were incidences of deteriorated cover (i.e. PDs present). As payments are for maintaining cover, landowners were asked to control PDs to return cover. Contract compliance is important, and we've received little input from adjacent states and D.C.
- FSA (MT) would like to have some information/data from this group to take to the national office to highlight the importance of PDs, and then offer landowners the option to maintain PD acres. Currently, contracts with PDs are on hold, but if FSA could ok not controlling PDs, then FSA could approve these contracts.
- What are the possible neighbor conflicts? Control is a private landowner prerogative. This is the approach that MDA has taken. No advocacy, no restrictions.
- Is there anything that FSA could require to improve PD habitat? Could use grazing, no shooting? EQIP cannot be used in conjunction with CRP. Early CRP projects used crested wheatgrass that may not be as appealing to PDs. Newer CRP projects are using native grasses. Buffalo grass can be very resilient to prairie dog clipping, and is also good for water erosion.

ACTION ITEM: *Allison Begley (MFWP) will provide a letter to FSA highlighting the importance of PD ecosystems to provide rationale for providing the option of control to CRP contracts.*

RANDY MATCHETT (CMR-USFWS)

DOES ENZOOTIC PLAGUE AFFECT BLACK-FOOTED FERRET SURVIVAL?

- The first plague epizootic happened in S Phillips Co. between 1992-1996. The effects of plague are obvious – loss of prey and habitat. First outbreak reduced PD acreage by 75%. We know plague is out there because animals (badgers, coyotes) have titers for plague (ie. evidence in blood that they have been exposed to plague). What is the exposure rate for carnivores in the area?

- Have been working on low-level plague (enzootic plague) to determine the transmission routes, where it's maintained, etc. – Holmes research on small mammals on and off PD towns (2006) found no persistent plague in southern Phillips County (i.e. no plague positive fleas or serum samples). Study at Fort Belknap found alternate results - 60% of colonies show evidence of plague in fleas. This study (Hansen et al 2006) used a different method – now looking to evaluate differences in methodologies.
- Toni Rocke has been working on plague vaccine - 69% of the BFF vaccinates survived exposure to plague in a lab environment. Vaccine not 100% effective. Also working on an oral vaccine for PDs.
- Randy covered the history of BFFs and releases in MT (UL Bend, 40-Complex/Beauchamp Creek, Fort Belknap, Northern Cheyenne). BFF population at UL Bend started to crash in 2001 (5-15% survival post-release on BLM 40-Complex/Beauchamp Creek). Last release was 2005.
- Study was set up to assess the effectiveness of dusting/non-dusting PDs, and vaccinating/not vaccinating BFFs. Dusting happened in 2003, 2004, 2005. Half BFFs released on dusted sites were vaccinated, and half released on non-dusted sites were not vaccinated. Surveyed dusted and non dusted sites equally with 131 individual BFFs involved in the study. Had high detection rates. Results = 51% survival on dusted land and/or vaccinated, 29% survival with neither.
- What do you do with results? 1) Vaccinate all – the logistics are tough, can't get vaccine; 2) continue dusting – cost and labor, equipment and materials expensive, side effects on other animals; 3) continue monitoring and continue vaccinating. At UL Bend, no more dusting currently anticipated; will promote PD expansion with fire. 13 BFFs remain at UL Bend. Believe 0 at 40-Complex/Beauchamp Creek.
- *Summary*: enzootic plague reduces BFF survival; plague vaccine provides some protection to BFFs; dust (deltamethrin) increases BFF survival rates; fleas are involved in the transmission of plague; dust did not improve the survival of vaccinated BFFs or vice versa.
- Comments on dusting – Cost is comparable to what people pay to poison them (~$10/ac). Translocations are more expensive ($20/prairie dog). Economically generate more prairie dogs by dusting.
- Prairie dog 'plague-survivors' – Has any work been done to propagate those? A handful have been sampled and have show exposure to plague and survival. No work yet to find out if that is an inheritable resistance, or what other things are going on.
- What causes a Plague outbreak? The previous fall was wet; heat seems to reduce epizootics. What kinds of things drive flea dynamics and survival? humidity, temperature, etc. no one's sure yet.
- Last big epizootics were 1992-1996, first time prairie dogs died on UL Bend was 2007 – UL Bend prairie dog colonies were dusted in '93, '96, '97, 2003, '04, and '05 – The fact that we did dust may have had a better result than we thought, taking into account for the fact that towns are still there. There was a demonstrated effect following the first year after dusting, so may be able to get by with dusting every other year.

ALLISON BEGLEY (MT FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS)

CURRENT PD LEGAL STATUS

SPECIES STATUS IN MT: As of October 1, 2007, black-tailed and white-tailed prairie dogs no longer hold dual status as 'nongame in need of management' (under FWP) and 'vertebrate pest' (under MDA). These species have reverted to vertebrate pest status only. FWP shooting regulations are no longer in effect. Translocation protocol is still in effect. Translocation does not infringe on Department of Agriculture authority; it is just another means of removal. BTPD and WTPD remain a Species of Concern in MT and a Tier 1 Species of Greatest Conservation Need, and FWP will continue conservation and management efforts under broader authority to 'manage all wildlife'.

BLACK-TAILED PRAIRIE DOG:
Conservation groups filed a formal petition to USFWS for federal protection of the black-tailed prairie dog under the Endangered Species Act (08/02/2007). The request follows a February lawsuit filed by the groups challenging the 2004 determination by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) that the species does not warrant Endangered Species Act protection.
http://www.fguardians.org/library/paper.asp?nMode=2&nLibraryID=525

Original petition was filed in 1998, with a 'warranted, but precluded' finding in 2000. BTPDs remained as an ESA 'Candidate' species from 2000 until 2004.

2007 Petition highlights: 1) Overestimate of PD acreage, and little evidence that acreage has changed since original petition; 2) plague threat was downgraded in 2004 finding inappropriately 3) the Service's application of listing criteria (habitat destruction, shooting, plague (esp in SD), Rozol as approved bait in several states, poisoning in SD).

WHITE-TAILED PRAIRIE DOG:
In November 2007, Conservation groups requested that the USFWS overturn the 2004 decision that listing white-tailed prairie dogs was not warranted. The WTPD species decision is included among the ESA listing decisions that were the result of 'political interference'. Earlier this year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service admitted that Julie MacDonald, a former Interior Department appointee, overruled biologists to deny protecting the white-tailed prairie dog under the Endangered Species Act.
http://www.nativeecosystems.org/newsroom/endangered-species-act-protection-sought-for-white-tailed-prairie-dog/

If we proceed to re-address dual status, will we have lots of support? Yes, support was offered by MDA, HSUS, BLM, R6, USFS, FWS, landowners. In general, partners are confused by the loss of the status and how to proceed in the current environment. Stockgrowers, Audubon, NWF, WWF were all in support of eliminating the sunset and retaining dual status.

ACTION ITEM: *Allison will pursue steps needed to regain dual status.*

INTERSTATE PRAIRIE DOG CONSERVATION TEAM:

- Allison has not met with this group since 2006. Bill Van Pelt is the interim coordinator; Deb O'Neill resigned. Efforts are currently focused on Gunnison's Prairie Dogs, and a conservation strategy including monitoring (occupancy modeling). This methodology is also

proposed for WTPD as well. However, MT's small WTPD population won't lend itself well to this methodology. We will continue to monitor our WTPDs as Interstate group moves forward. This group will be preparing an annual summary for 2007.

LANDOWNER INCENTIVES:

In 2005, the Landowner Incentives subcommittee compiled their efforts in a draft Incentive Program that was submitted as an EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program) Special Initiative Proposal for FY2006.

Various aspects of EQIP make it appealing for incentives: 1) in the 2002 Farm Bill, at-risk species habitat conservation was a priority; 2) there is an incentives provision; 3) locally driven; 4) flexibility in contract (1-10 year) and payments ($50,000 to$450,000) 5) include potential for cost-share for conservation practices.

Our proposal was for a direct monetary incentive plan for 10 years. The payment system would be tiered with the highest priority habitat supporting BFFs, then large colonies (>500ac), colonies (50-499 ac for BUOW, MOPL), and colonies <50 ac in areas of special concern (edge of range). A bonus would be paid for areas where a landowner would encourage growth of a PD colony. A landowner would be asked to provide full protection for those PD colonies enrolled (no shooting, poisoning), would allow dusting, monitoring and mapping when necessary, no sod-busting, and the expectation that colonies would grow. At the time, CCAC (Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances were proposed as regulatory assurances in the event that PDs become listed.

Our proposal was not supported, and we were directed to work with Local Working Groups if we chose to proceed with this type of incentive. We've been stalled since this last attempt.

PETE HUSBY (STATE BIOLOGIST, NRCS)

CONSERVING PDS ON PRIVATE LAND – GETTING TO KNOW THE NRCS:

- History - Started as Soil Conservation Service in 1935. Their job then was to help private landowners make a living on the land. In 1940, conservation districts were formed to provide local guidance. District conservationist is the most critical position. Each area office (4) has a biologist. NRCS is built on the concept of 'locally-led' efforts.

- Funding - Something like PD incentives will need the approval of the state technical committee, conservation district involvement, and local work groups. Make sure to involve everyone you can at the local level. Need to show compatibility between land use and wildlife conservation. At certain level of grazing, prairie dog town is good for biodiversity to livestock (diet selection, etc. - more protein per bite depending on make up of pd town).
    - There is compatibility between CIG (Conservation Innovation Grants) and grants to stimulate development – for example, grant to FWP to investigate flagging on fence to control wolves (turbo fladry).
    - Environmental Quality Incentives - This program funds specific conservation issues. Example – Madison valley and Boulder predator deterrent – high tech

power fence around calving pasture, bee yards, getting rid of bone yards, herders to stay with stock, hazing wolves, etc. Should concentrate on this EQIP program. Supported by local people. No minimum or maximum. A pot of EQIP money is set aside for special initiatives. Each county is given an allocation. Must sign up a year before on initiative proposals.

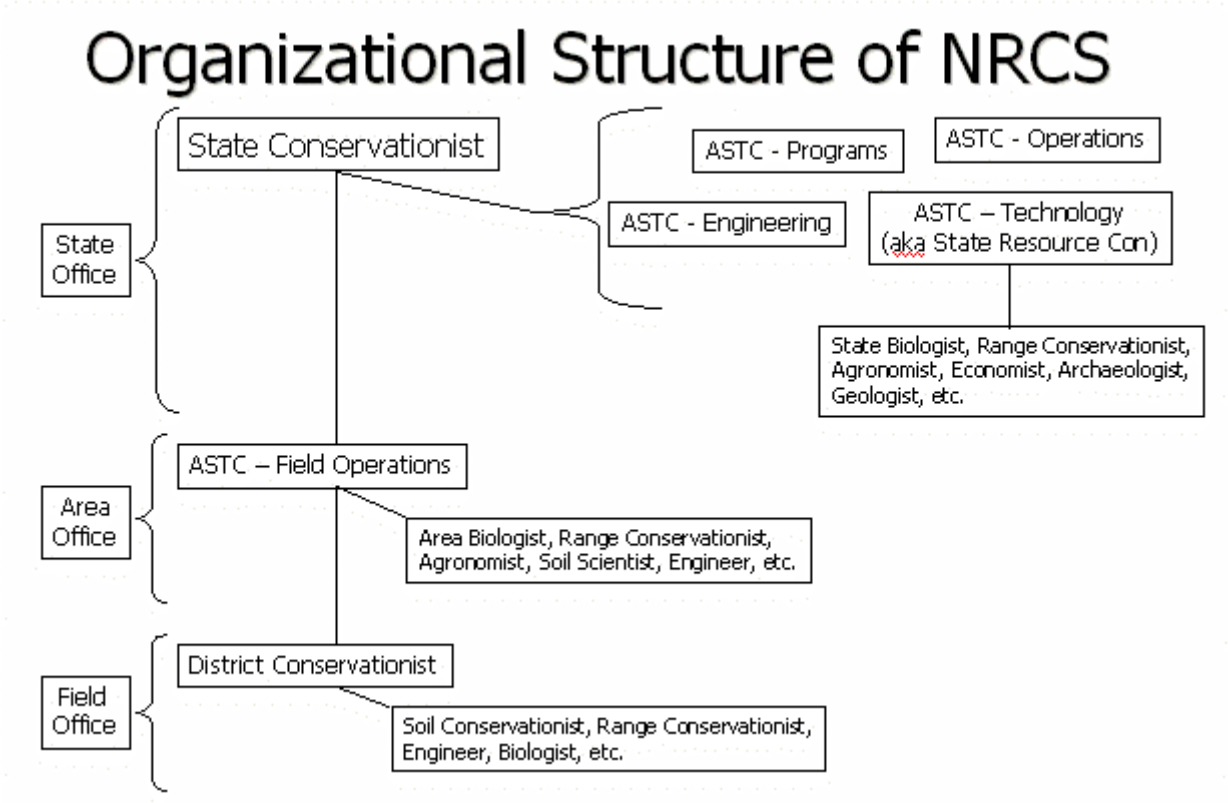
- WHIP – Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program: uses cost-share, a possibility

- Landowners need to make contact at the field office level. Want to do something that landowners will want to be involved in. Important to stress mutual benefits of all parties.

- Chance of success for prairie dog funding is to use ferrets, burrowing owls, etc. to show the benefits. Sensitive species conservation. Need to market it right. To do a special project for our area, start with the people on the ground and see what they are interested in, because if they are, they will participate.

- The State Technical Committee generally meets quarterly. Next one has not been set yet because of stalled farm bill.

- Farm Bill - Differences between Senate and House on farm bill? Unsure (*see* http://www.nacdnet.org/policy/agriculture/farmbill/2007/). There are big differences regarding how much money was put in etc. Goal of next one is to simplify. There are 3 possible outcomes: If it goes through the way it is now, the President will veto; or adjust so the president will approve; or extend current bill up to 2 years.



TED TOOMBS (ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE, CENTER FOR CONSERVATIONS INCENTIVES)
USING FARM BILL INCENTIVES FOR PDS – EXPERIENCE FROM UTAH

- Working in Utah with prairie dog (a listed species). Build private landowner support first; respect NRCS locally led process; build outside support; demonstrations work. Most of land in private ownership cannot solve our problems without landowners and they need incentives. Model projects combine financial incentives and regulatory assurances. They also involve species that require management. Want to be beneficial to both landowners and species.

- Utah Prairie Dog project – Incentives may not be the best approach: questions to ask a) are there costs to landowner, b) can those costs be mitigated, and c) will landowner implement practice without incentives?

    - Identify limiting habitat conditions. For UPD: brush encroachment, livestock competition, vegetation height, low plant diversity, burrow flooding.

    - What actions are beneficial? reduce brush height, manage vegetation and irrigation, etc.

    - Find a willing landowner – this is the most valuable proponent of the program. Neighbors started to get interested. Finally went to Fish & Wildlife Service to do a control area. Had a control area built into the Safe Harbor Agreement to reduce those prairie dogs around landowner's riparian area (i.e. a cap on UPD acreage and distribution). In UT, the state was involved with control and translocation. A good demo project will attract other landowners willing to do similar things. The incentive here was for cost-share practices that improved the pasture.

- Eventually, with these successes NRCS set aside 1.4 million for at-risk species in 2005, '06, and '07 - mostly for sage grouse, fish and other endangered species in Utah. Have used all the money every year. Built the program further by finding more landowners. Over 5 years, have 13 landowners. Created a habitat evaluation guide (NRCS tool) that allows people to assess habitat.

Question: UT PDs are threatened species – what about BTPD that are off the candidate list? When they come off the list, the money dries up. When a species is not a candidate and the effort is to keep from getting them there, it is hard to find help. The FWS is willing to do a CCAA. Time consuming to get an agreement through initially, but an umbrella agreement can turn individual landowner agreement into a one-page document. ED-CCI can help with drafting Safe Harbor Agreement or CCAA. Approval process for a safe harbor = 1.5-0.5 years to finalize. If a species is listed after signing an agreement, landowner is not held to doing any more than what was originally agreed upon. Individuals make it work. Find people who are dedicated to making it happen.

Are incentives right thing?
Find a landowner to promote and stick with you.

Build community support
Understand NRCS process
Do a demonstration project on a small scale

How do we get past people not wanting to do it? In Utah, the landowners wanted to upgrade their irrigation systems (can do with cost-share monies from EQIP). Incorporated prairie dog project into irrigation system. Could move forward in line to get cost-share benefits with a higher score (for wildlife benefits). Stock water is the big issue in Phillips County. Make it more comprehensive to include grassland. Then you can incorporate birds and imbed prairie dogs into the program.

In CO, a prairie dog incentive program was developed, but they had no willing landowners…so the plan failed. They re-worked the program to be more comprehensive (a grassland species conservation program) and have had some success.

Discussion: Should we expand the program to incorporate all grassland species? For the grassbank, we started with the things that we could agree on. If we broaden our scope, we may broaden our interest. For the next R6 PDIC, there will be a public meeting looking for outreach and feedback. We need to build trust and work with the willing, and then follow through on promises. Consider Conservation Innovation Grants that are used to demo a new, innovative management practice. 2 concerns thus far: 1) there is no opportunity to control on public lands, and there is an intermingling of public and private land, 2) control has to be on the table (that is funded and effective). We should try an area approach – but where would we start? Can APHIS-Wildlife Services get involved in control? Package needs to include control, and regulatory assurances. In the case of the UPD, the umbrella safe harbor was held by the Resource Council of the Conservation District. Should look at grassland management with a bonus for having PDs…and look at 'stewardship services'. We need to focus on paying for production, not to have someone 'not do something'…not looking for subsidies or payouts. A Rodent Control District provides staff via mill levy for control.

ACTION ITEMS: *What was the public response to the First Creek Hall meeting (R6 PDIC)?*
: How can we design a grassland collaborative approach?
: What approach is the Rancher Stewardship Alliance considering for collaborative conservation and cooperative land management?
: Consider working with ED-CCI to develop draft CCAA.